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AMERICA AT WAR

A SERMON

PREACHED IN THE FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF PHILADELPHIA

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BY

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AMERICA AT WAR

"If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

"But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

"And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."—MAT. XVIII: 15-17.

SCRIPTURE LESSON: Mat. v, 3-10; 21-23; 38-48; and XVIII, 15-17.

[This sermon opened with remarks addressed to the congregation, personally, continuing as follows.]

I COULD have, at this moment, no greater relief of mind than from the confidence I cherish that, in the horror and sorrow which fill my heart at the unhappy condition of our country, you are sure, substantially, to sympathize.

It is still the grief of the world that it does not yet recognize the security and strength of the ethical principles offered to its faith by its highest master in religion. That pitiful lament ascribed to Jesus in one of those recently discovered "sayings"—"I stood in the midst of the world, and I found all men drunken, and none found I athirst among them, and my soul grieves over the sons of men, because they are blind in their hearts"—rings in my ears as I note how prompt men still are to look to *force* to secure even the aims of righteousness and humanity, and how little patience they have for the methods of forbearance, brotherly love, and moral influence, on which Jesus insisted as not only right and beautiful, but also adequate and sufficient in all the relations of life. It fills me with sadness to see how readily, in the hearts of

those who have heard his words from infancy, the instincts of prejudice and hate are aroused against distant communities of persons, among whom, were we acquainted with them, we should find uncounted thousands of good and true men and women whom to know must be to love. I have never been in any corner of the world where I did not meet such; and among descendants of that people who are now placed in public antagonism to ours, have been some, at least, of the finest characters I have ever known.

How unfortunate and misleading it is that great masses of men become, as it were, *personified* in our thoughts, their individualities merged in a common *type* (which actually exists nowhere, but is an idea, merely), towards which our sentiments, especially our inhuman sentiments, readily go out under excitement, not qualified as they are in actual personal relations by the presence of real facts, but given free rein by fancy, prejudice and popular clamor!

I would not forget that, in fact, every nation is an aggregation of families, of industrious fathers, loving mothers; husbands and wives laboring jointly for their young broods; good sons and daughters caring for their parents; friends and neighbors meeting in the happy intercourse of life. All have their idiosyncrasies—our own type has its very faulty ones—but all are human; all are what the providence of God, in history and nature, has made them; all are our brethren, to be thought of and dealt with in the spirit of love, which should make us considerate of the sources of their faults when these offend us, and patient with them as we might wish they should be with our own; and all this as truly when they are aggregated into nations as when we consider them individually.

My last entreaty of you, at this moment, shall be that during the months or years of cruel strife which sadly lie before us, you forget none of these things. We are not individuals, but members one of another, and you will now, for some time, be peculiarly conscious that, in even the most important respects, the destiny and conduct of the private man are powerfully overruled by his relation to a great social order, over which the judgment, con-

science and will of particular men necessarily preside, to mould common action. The organization of men in society, in states and nations, being essential to the development of God's plan for humanity, becomes a divine thing, to which every man is bound to pay profound respect. This is, as I lately remarked, the underlying truth of the apostle's saying, "The powers that be are ordained of God." The existing political order is entitled to that which it claims of every citizen—an essential *loyalty* of spirit and purpose. Only so can it accomplish its task, and the alternative must be anarchy.

Yet not that this, in a free state, may ever reduce the individual to an automaton and puppet, such as despotisms make him. The free citizen is forever the divinely ordained *critic* of those who, while appointed to administer affairs, are yet only the *servants* of the free community. In no possible exigency, least of all in one abnormal and dangerous, should the free citizen abandon or relax his vigilant oversight of all that legislators or administrators do. In critical times, the opportunities of corruption, the risks of folly, the temptations to relax morals and descend to planes of motive and conduct unworthy of an advanced day, necessarily multiply. Conscious of our own characteristic fault as a people, that, indifferent to the noble quality of our institutions we have come to place, in control of our affairs, so many of our *least* worthy citizens; that we so seldom, in fact, promote the presence, in our public counsels, of the highest and best, the wisest, truest and most capable of our citizens, we are bound to watch at all times (and most of all in critical times), every act of our public men, to scan its spirit, and consider its form, that we may thus supply, ourselves, the elements of wisdom and righteousness so often lacking in those whom we select to represent us.

I have no words to express, my dear friends, my chagrin and grief at the state of public affairs in which our nation actually is, to-day. I cannot yet realize it, so as adequately to judge it. To us all, I am sure, it must, for a while, be as a hideous and sorrowful dream. I cannot possibly give it my approval, nor approve the course of

those who have done most to bring it about. I profoundly distrust the most effective motives which have underlain their action. In large measure, I believe these to have been sordid, dishonest, unpatriotic,—*un-American* in whatever sense should give that term honor. I do not feel that we have treated a sister-nation, even one whose sincerity in diplomacy we have had grave reason to distrust, with the consideration which a magnanimous people conscious of their unlimited power and resources, should have manifested. I believe that a firm and persistent, yet forbearing, course of policy, like that to which our Chief Magistrate sought so earnestly and nobly to confine us, would, in due time, have realized every worthy aspiration and every just claim which is involved in this public issue. There will forever be a profound pathos about the closing paragraphs of the President's Message, in which he so earnestly urged on Congress patience in dealing with a difficult question, and besought them to leave to him, as the executive head of the nation, the task of composing it, of realizing the claims of humanity and justice. I shall forever honor this man, on whom the responsibility of supreme official station has so plainly worked to give him the gravity, the conscientiousness and true patriotism which well become the uncrowned head of a mighty people. The beatitude of the peacemakers places a halo around the head of WILLIAM MCKINLEY.

But we are now in the presence of an accomplished fact. The causes, the motives, the mistakes which have brought it about are matters of history,—swiftly made in our modern day.

The duty of a citizen of a free state, at war with a sister nation, is the question for each private heart and conscience to consider.

What is it?

First:—Forget not this, my friends, that no act of man can set aside the truths of God, which become the laws of God in the world. Every law of right, every law of human brotherhood, the whole law of love, are as imperative to-day as they were yesterday. "Though hand join in hand, yet shall not the wicked go unpunished." Com-

mitted by the acts of our representatives to the ghastly state of war, we are bound to mitigate that condition by applying to it every moral palliative which progressing civilization has made practicable. Already, as a nation, we start out honorably, in the public declaration by our Administration that the worst element of naval warfare, the practice of privateering, shall be by us abandoned.

So, to the end, we are to insist that every other condition of warfare which may reduce its miseries and moral evils be unfailingly realized. It is one of the comforts of the moment to feel sure that, in these respects, our nation will not fail before the world. As the terrible contests approaching will bring out novel horrors, through the awful potency of the instruments employed,—and thus, I hope, hasten the day when war shall cease through its own impracticability,—so may something be achieved to place the conduct of warfare on a higher moral plane, in all respects.

Secondly :—I beg you, in your private hearts, abandon and put steadily aside every relic of barbarous thought and feeling, of foolish and criminal *pride*, of that insane joy in strife which comes so easily to the surface in times such as await you. In the sight of God, recognize that even a truly just war, if such there may ever be, is yet the most deplorable of public necessities ; that all war is a relic and expression of *barbarism*, which it is the tendency of civilization to outgrow and do away ; that one of which a humane expediency is, at best, the sole moral justification, is especially deplorable ; to be prosecuted only as a distressing and nauseous task, to which human weakness, error and perversity constrain us, and for which we incessantly implore the forgiveness of Almighty God.

Thirdly :—One of the worst evils to be apprehended from this sudden outbreak of warfare, is the development in our people of the military spirit. The presence of that spirit among our Northern people is an unhappy legacy from the Civil War. It hardly existed among us before that unhappy struggle. There was an unapprehended *dignity* in our position, in those former days, on which it

may be that the historian of the future will look back wistfully. Already a great nation, with a vast territory, our ports lay undefended; our coast was open to the prow of every approaching vessel; we had scarcely the rudiments of army or navy. Secure in that retirement from international complications which WASHINGTON had enjoined, in the sober and industrious character of our population, ambition and the love of strife lay dormant and ineffective among us.

Alas! the scene changed. We were forced into war, and by it the military instinct was visibly awakened in many breasts. The noblest spectacle of the war for the Union was the quick disbandment of our huge armies, and their immediate return to civil pursuits. Yet, by the romance of military service, by its intense stimulation of the virile passions, by the intoxication of our success, the seeds of martial impulse and ambition were widely sown, and they may yet bear bitter fruit in the coming development of our nation, unless their growth be rigorously repressed. *To no people is the love of war so perilous as to a democratic one.* It makes the principles of civil glory look pale. It accustoms populations to subordination, and to the idolatry of individual leaders. More than any other principle, as history has shown, *it paves the way for empire.*

We undoubtedly see this principle working to-day in many hearts. It has plainly influenced us, lately, to make us impatient of peaceful processes and ready for the quick arbitrament of physical strife. I counsel you to be on your guard against it, and watchfully to discourage it in each other, and especially in the young. Let not the possible instances of destruction and death which we may inflict awaken in you an unchristian exultation over a people who have become our public antagonists, but whom God has made, evermore, and now as much as ever, our brethren. Give no place in your hearts to hate. Let there be no room there for that false and wicked illusion, "glory." Let the blood of men, with which our terrible guns may presently incarnadine the Cuban seas, blush before God for the lingering barbarity of our race,

and every tear which we cause some Spanish mother to shed for her sons, rapt from her to perish of wounds or fever, touch your hearts as tenderly as those which will presently be coursing down the cheeks of our American parents and brothers and sisters.

The time has gone by for men to rejoice in warfare and its awful deeds of prowess and scenes of carnage. General Sherman justly characterized it—let us thank him for the formula—"War is Hell!" In its orgies let devils glory, not Christian men, not Christian women, whose garb might well be sackcloth while this Satan rages on our coasts. On you, and such as you, my friends, rests the solemn duty, during the coming days of strife, to subdue in yourselves, and rigidly to discourage in others, all admiration of war's horrible methods and its guilty exploits.

War, in its facts, is simply everything that is cruel, wicked, bad. It takes our educated youth, our honest friends and neighbors, and turns them into pirates, murderers and robbers. It absorbs the whole energy of an enlightened people in acts which, in normal times, are the worst of crimes. "*Inter arma, leges silent*"—in war the laws are silenced—was the ancient saying. Each principle of justice and mercy is suspended. The true interests of life languish. Prosperity stagnates; art, education and charity are robbed of their resources. Civilization pauses, and its wheels turn back, while the Juggernaut-car rolls on. Our children and grandchildren will gather the bitter fruits, the seeds of which our people have, to-day, elected to sow. The historian of our nation may have to chronicle a deep-seated *arrest* in the development of our institutions and our popular character, dating from the false, false step we have recklessly taken.

A thing I peculiarly and poignantly deplore, to-day, is that the tender minds of our *youth* are to be saturated with the baneful associations of strife, and with delusive military ideals. I pray you, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers of the young, keep ever before them the barbarity and wickedness of war; the blasphemous horror of its scenes of carnage and destruction; and let not the

calm and holy ideals, the sacred visions of him who spoke the Beatitudes, let not the eternal truth of God, the Father of Love, be obscured by the smoke and dust of the heaven-defying conflicts of which they shall presently hear, alas! too much.

Sometimes, my friends, open the pages of some great master in thought and style, and read them a passage like this, from Thomas Carlyle:

"What, speaking in quiet, unofficial language, is the net purport and upshot of war? To my own knowledge, there dwell and toil, in the British village of Dumdrudge, usually some five hundred souls. From these, by certain 'natural enemies' of the French, there are successively selected, during the French war, say thirty able-bodied men. Dumdrudge, at her own expense, has suckled and nursed them; she has, not without difficulty and sorrow, fed them up to manhood, and even trained them to crafts, so that one can weave, another build, another hammer, etc. Nevertheless, amid much weeping and swearing, they are selected, all dressed in uniform, and shipped away, at the public charge, some thousand miles away, and fed there until wanted.

"And now to that same spot are thirty similar French artisans, from a French Dumdrudge, in like manner wending; until at length, after infinite effort, the two come into actual juxtaposition, and thirty stand fronting thirty, each with a gun in his hands. Straightway the word 'fire' is given, and they blow the souls out of each other, and in place of sixty brisk, useful craftsmen, the world has sixty dead carcasses, which it must bury, and anon shed tears for. Had these men any quarrel? Busy as the devil is, not the smallest! They lived far enough apart; were total strangers each one to the other. How then? Simpleton! Their governors had fallen out, and instead of shooting each other, had the cunning to make these poor blockheads shoot."

Or read to your growing sons, my friends, tempted by the military spirit, these words of another great writer, John Ruskin:

"If you have to take away masses of men from all in-

dustrial employment, and feed them by the labor of others, transport them and provide them with destructive machines, varied daily in national rivalry of inventive cost (so that a gun of yesterday is useless to-morrow); if you have to ravage the country which you attack, to destroy for a score of future years its roads, its woods, its cities, and its harbors, and tear thousands of men to pieces with jagged shot, and leave the fragments of dead and wounded creatures beyond all help of surgery, to starve and parch, through days of torture, until they sink and mingle into clots of clay—what book of accounts shall record the cost of your work? What book of judgment sentence the guilt of it?"

It is only by the temporary extinction of humanity and morality in men's hearts that the awful injuries of warfare can be committed by civilized men. It illustrates strikingly the fact that the conscience and moral standards of *bodies* of people are always below those of the enlightened individual; and that, in corporate capacities, men will often do, or consent to, acts which the individual could not bring himself to do. *War* is only the principle of the *duel*, surviving and operative among nations; when, in the most highly civilized of them, it has been condemned and discarded as not less wicked than foolish between private persons. The "wager of battle," in private life, is now superceded by the stern and sure process of orderly judicature. It may be that had our nation, which lately went so far towards securing the establishment of a high court of arbitration between nations,—had it not so unworthily rejected, at last, that promising and noble aim,—might have achieved the settlement of present difficulties in that civilized and rational way. The only justification, in the light of international law, which can be pleaded for the war, is that which our successive Chief Magistrates, for many years have urged, but on which individuals seem to be laying the least stress, namely, the intolerable inconvenience, expense and friction occasioned by the half anarchic condition of a community lying closely contiguous to our own. I am sure that this is what has urged the present Administration, as it did the preceding

and several before that. Surely, our appeal to an international tribunal might have settled this, had such a tribunal existed. At least, in the spirit of that remarkable passage which I read you just now from the counsels of Jesus as to the settlement of disputes, it might and should have been *tried*; that, so far as possible, our skirts might have been kept free of blood-guiltiness. At least, some appeal to the conscience of the world, to the congress of the nations, might and should have been made before we invoked the murderous issue of armed force. Had it not succeeded, that final arbitrament would have been open. War was, long ago, called *ultima ratio regum*—the last argument of kings; to fight and kill is always in order. But he only “has his quarrel just,” in these enlightened days, who completely exhausts every other alternative. *Only* as the strictly last and inescapable resort, can war be justified in the modern forum of morals. That justification the present war certainly does not possess.

Among our people, individually, it is plain that the motive which enables some good men, and, alas! some women, to justify, morally, the step we have taken, is the humanitarian one. I cannot discuss it at length. I will only say that it seems to me utterly illogical and unsound. Were the present case plainer, it would be a most dangerous innovation, in international relations, that one people might, by the irresponsible methods of warfare, intervene as their judgment should justify, in the concerns of their neighbors, to right even great wrongs. It would introduce such uncertainty, suspicion and distrust among the nations as would offset, a hundred times, the good which, in a particular case, it might be alleged to achieve. It seems to be overlooked, by those who now plead the call of humanity, that all the sufferings of the victims of war in Cuba could have been relieved by a ten-thousandth part of the cost of war, and without its probable gigantic additions to the sum of human misery.

And yet, in the actual prevalence of this humane idea and sentiment, mistaken and misdirected as, in my solemn judgment, it is, I see the one moral alleviation of the action which has been taken by our representatives in

invoking war. Ignobler motives have unquestionably worked potently in our Congress to that end; principles against which it shall be to the abiding honor of the President that he strove earnestly, to the last. Corrupt politics, the ambition of parties and of individual leaders, defeated his humane effort to stay the tide.

Yet, as in the war for the Union, the sympathy for the slaves and desire to purge away the shame of slavery became so potent and corrective a principle with our Northern people, so it will take from this present unhappy struggle something of its moral evil to us, that an intense sympathy for the suffering reconcentrados, and for the insurgents struggling to cast off a cruel political yoke, is the animating sentiment which, while it blinds their eyes, will yet, in some measure, defend their hearts from the worst demoralizations, to which they would otherwise be exposed. I doubt if there was ever a war against which the instincts of good citizens were so generally arrayed. In those who are able to give it an approval which calmer and more religious reflection would, it seems to me, withhold, the wish to do good, the belief that we are acting in the interest of humanity and right will be, under God, a measurable corrective of the debasing and hardening influences of a state of war.

Let us, at least, humbly hope and pray that out of the sorrows and crimes of which every war is compact, and out of those which are near, some good will be realized. At least, let us hope that the *barbarities* of war, its inconsistency with high civilization, its flagrant inconsistency with the spirit of religion, and peculiarly with the spirit of that holy and inspired soul whose personality Christians adore, while to his precepts they give so little practical attention and confidence,—let us hope that on the lurid background of coming battles with their carnage, of desolated homes, of mothers weeping for their children because they are not,—the hatefulness of hate, of strife, of violence, may so appear that no later generation of our enlightened people may ever consent, again, to achieve even aims which seem to them right and good by means so uncivilized, brutal, bestial and God-defying.